

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

A hitch in time

After spending a considerable amount of time drawing up proposals for potential clients, David Robinson is dismayed to find that people are ignoring him

First, an apology to readers logging on to the website (www.drsaxon.co.uk) expecting a blog update. I've been completely dilatory of late. My best excuse is the holiday (see *Under Development*, *Shopper* December 2007) then, on my return, the lack of time, resulting in a couple of months without making a single entry. As we all know, an out-of-date blog is about as much use as a one-legged man at an arse-kicking contest. Or, as BBC commentator Charlie Cox would have it, as useful as the bottom half of a mermaid.

THINKING ALLOWED

It's been a frustrating year in many ways, with lots of effort turning out to be unproductive. Typically custards contact us with some unbelievably urgent requirement which, after much discussion, is documented and priced. Then, miraculously, the urgency evaporates like morning mist and no decision is made. It's not even as if we've lost out to a cheaper, better, smarter or faster competitor. In most cases the custard is "just thinking about it".

Even worse are the congenitally ungracious types who can't even be bothered to speak to you after you've wasted hours listening to their weird requirements. I had one of these last month. This guy – we'll call him Mr Curmudgeon – has a team of mobile engineers who install and service industrial equipment. He wanted to control multiple stock locations, record the issue of parts from vans, invoice customers and link all the data back to a Sage Line 50 accounting system. And do timesheets. And route planning.

Now, there are several ways to achieve this. I'm familiar with the 'fancy' way, as our central heating boiler has been playing up lately, and we've had endless visits from British Gas engineers, all of whom carry Panasonic Toughbook computers. In a world where a cheapo laptop costs £350, a Toughbook costs many arms and legs and is built like a brick outhouse. The British Gas system connects to the main office using a



built-in mobile phone/modem and can download service history, issue parts and invoices and tell the engineer where his next job is.

I WANNA HOLD YOUR HANDHELD

A cheaper method would be to use a PDA-based system to record parts issues and job start and finish times, then upload a full day's data each evening as a single batch. Mr Curmudgeon liked 'cheaper'. We discussed the alternatives and I spent a couple of hours gathering a list of requirements, then promised to get back to him with some proposals and costs. As always, we did this in writing, with enough detail for the customer to (a) make a decision and (b) have something to refer to if he thinks that what we deliver won't do the job.

Point b is very important for the protection of both parties. The proposals always list the key requirements that must be met, as well as the suggested means for meeting those requirements. That way, if there is ever a disagreement over expectation and delivery, we both have a point of reference.

In an ideal world, the customer would write the requirements list. In practice, they almost always

leave it to me. Mr Curmudgeon's took me a couple of days. A week after I sent it to him I'd heard nothing, so I emailed him to ask what he thought of it. Zilch. A phone call went to the dreaded voicemail, so I left a message. Zilch again. After half a dozen more attempts, I gave up. He probably didn't like the price.

I think it's sad that some people think it's OK to use two full days of someone else's time and energy and can't even find two minutes to say, "Thanks, but no thanks". I wonder how long it will be before some American-style lawyer comes up with the concept of suing for wasted time as they do now for spurious injuries.

A DECENT PROPOSAL

Right now I'm in the middle of writing another system proposal. This one's for a factory in the next town that makes portable industrial buildings in batches. The company is healthy and profitable, but the international conglomerate of which it was part was having financial problems elsewhere in the world, and part of the solution was to sell this company. This wouldn't be a problem, except that the head office owned and hosted their

accounting and manufacturing software, and their access to it got cut off after the sale. So they rushed off to a local computer supplier, who sold them a pair of 'off-the-shelf' packages – one for accounting and one for manufacturing – and a pile of training and installation days. The resulting bill had quite a few noughts on the end.

The problem was that the software didn't address a number of key issues. After much tearing out of hair, the boss, Mr Eastwood, called to see if we could help. Could we make the package work the way they want?

What did the original statement of requirements say?

"The what?"

His chances of getting a refund look pretty small, then.

MADE TO MEASURE

My first step, as always, was to gather the requirements and facts. The old software allowed them to do such things as prepare suggested purchase orders by individual production batch, which they see as being absolutely vital. They also need to be able to 'adjust' a goods-inwards entry after the event, as staff often make mistakes or discover faulty items after the initial goods-inwards procedure. The new software requires them to adjust mistakes by, in effect, returning the entire shipment to the supplier, then entering it again with the revised values. As some inward shipments have upwards of 100 different items, this is a lot of work.

I break the bad news that the disparity between what they have and what they want is too great for a quick fix, and that the best thing is to bin the 'manufacturing' software. The good news is that they can keep the ledger system. Our replacement package, Delta, can do 90 per cent of the things Mr Eastwood wants and, as it's all our own code, Keefy can add the other 10 per cent quite easily. **CS**

David Robinson

Software and systems developer

davidr@computershopper.co.uk

